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US steps up military operations in Iraq, Syria

By Patrick Martin

10 November 2014

US warplanes struck across a wide area of northern Syria and northern and western Iraq over the last four days, in the most extensive bombing since President Obama ordered US military intervention in the region three months ago.

The Syrian targets included several positions in the northwest province of Idlib held by Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist group fighting against the government of President Bashar al-Assad and aligned with Al Qaeda.

The Iraqi targets included a meeting of leaders of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) held outside Mosul, a city of two million, which destroyed a dozen vehicles and killed as many as 50 people.

An Iraqi military spokesman claimed that the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been wounded in the strike, but the US military command said it could not confirm this. There were other air strikes at Qaim, on the Syria-Iraq border in western Anbar province, and at other targets in Anbar, the main stronghold of ISIS in Iraq.

The intensified airstrikes began as the Pentagon announced that Obama had approved the doubling of US ground forces deployed in Iraq, with another 1,500 military trainers, including

special forces, to be sent to join the 1,400 troops already stationed in Baghdad and in Irbil, capital of the Kurdish region.

In an appearance Sunday morning on the CBS interview program “Face the Nation,” Obama was questioned whether he would send additional troops to Iraq, beyond the 3,000 already deployed. Interview Bob Schieffer asked, “Should we expect that more troops may be needed before this is over?” Obama replied, “You know, as commander-in-chief, I’m never going to say never.”

This wording is vague enough to drive a truck through, and it contrasts sharply with previous declarations by the White House that there would be no deployment of ground troops in Iraq, and that US troops would not engage in combat.

Given that at least 630 of the new US troops are to deploy to Anbar province, the bloodiest battlefield in both the 2003-2011 US war in Iraq and its current sequel, the claim that US troops will not be in combat is a barefaced lie.

Obama said that the deployment of additional troops marked a new stage in the mobilization of US and Iraqi forces against the Sunni fundamentalist group ISIS. The group presently controls the eastern third of Syria and western third of Iraq, including the city of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest.

The initial phase of the operation was to push out Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and install a new government in Baghdad, while using airstrikes to halt the momentum of the ISIS offensive that overran Mosul and brought the Sunni fundamentalists to the outskirts of Baghdad, Obama said.

With the additional US military advisers, he claimed, “We’re now in a position to start going on some offense. The airstrikes have been very effective in degrading ISIL’s capabilities and slowing the advance that they were making. Now what we need is ground troops, Iraqi ground troops that can start pushing them back.”

The first stage of this offensive began with two military operations Saturday. In both cases, the advances by Iraqi pro-government forces were preceded with heavy bombing by US warplanes.

In the first attack, Iraqi Army troops began an effort to relieve the siege of the Baiji refinery, Iraq’s largest, which has been surrounded by ISIS for two months. Baiji is in Salahuddin Province, northwest of Baghdad, about halfway between Baghdad and Mosul.

In the second attack, a Shiite militia joined forces with Sunni tribesmen in Anbar province in an effort to recapture the city of Hit, which ISIS took control of last month. It was the first large-scale use of Shiite militia troops in the Sunni-populated western region of the country. Shiite militias were notorious for slaughtering Sunnis in mixed areas of the country, and particularly for practicing a form of ethnic cleansing that drove much of the Sunni population out of the capital, Baghdad.

McClatchy News Service commented, “The need to call in some 3,000 Iranian-backed Shiite militiamen underscored the shambolic state of the Iraqi army, which all but imploded when the Islamic State swept out of its sanctuary in Syria in mid-June, conquered Mosul, the largest city in northern Iraq, and charged to the doorstep of Baghdad.”

ISIS forces and their allies among the Sunni population were said to be putting up ferocious resistance in both Baiji and Hit, although there was little independent reporting of the battles in either city. The weakness of the pro-government forces has led to stepped-up demands from the Pentagon for a direct commitment of US ground troops in Iraq.

The airstrikes in Syria marked a significant escalation of US attacks on non-ISIS Sunni fundamentalist groups, particularly the al-Nusra front, which has been waging a complex, multi-sided battle against groups of US-backed “rebels,” against the Assad regime and against ISIS itself.

A *Wall Street Journal* article on the fighting in Syria admitted that the group had been increasingly successful, reporting, “Nusra’s continuing advance appeared to be the result not only of the demoralization of rebel forces, which have been receiving ever-diminishing assistance through a US-backed covert program, but of growing support among local residents. Unlike the Islamic State, whose fighters are mostly from abroad, the vast majority of Nusra fighters are Syrians.”

General Lloyd Austin, commander of CENTCOM, which directs all US military operations in Syria and Iraq, denied that al-Nusra was the target of US airstrikes, maintaining the official fiction that US warplanes are only targeting the previously unknown Khorasan group, the name applied by US officials and the US media to a sub-section of al-Nusra.

Local observers in Idlib Province, however, said that several children had been killed in the airstrikes.

In relation to Syria, Obama reiterated the US commitment to removing the Assad regime, even while it targets some of the groups fighting Assad for airstrikes. In his interview Sunday on CBS, he said, “It is still our policy” that Assad should go, even though “our priority is to go after” the ISIS group, to prevent it from using its positions in Syria as a rear area to support its offensive in Iraq.